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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the psychological process of social-cognitive development of elementary children and social science education is reviewed. Social cognition is defined as the ways in which children come to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. For the most part, research findings have shown that a fundamental aspect of social cognition is "perspectivism," the ability to accommodate one's behavior to other points of view. Failure to consider other points of view results in "egocentrism," a form of cognitive solipsism in which individuals behave as if everyone experiences the world as they do. Studies in the psychology of social-cognitive development provide the empirical foundation for teaching the process-oriented, new social studies in the elementary school. Specific techniques of the new social studies education that develop social-cognitive development include inquiry activities, role playing, and values development. However, there is little evaluative research on these new techniques and curricula. Therefore, current theoretical interest in social cognition and practical interest in social science education create a particularly favorable context for the cooperation of psychologists and educators. (Author/DE)

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Social-cognitive Research and Social Science Education: From Theory to Practice

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A promising direction in developmental research with implications for education, one that has received increasing attention from psychologists during this past decade, is the study of ways in which children come to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. This field of interest has been called social cognition, because it is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge about people (including self) and social relations as distinct from objects and physical events. The study of social cognition is to be distinguished from the study of social behavior and personality development. Although the three fields have strong affinities to one another, the functional relationship between social cognition and social behavior and personality is not yet clear (Shantz, in press).

Social cognition theorists have investigated the development of children's conceptions of empathy, altruism, spatial perspectives, moral reasoning, and interpersonal communication (see Shantz, in press, for a review of research). For the most part, findings have shown that a fundamental aspect of social cognition is "perspectivism," the ability to accomodate one's beha-

vior to other points of view. Failure to consider other points of view results in "egocentrism," a form of cognitive solipsism in which individuals behave as if everyone experiences the world as they do. According to Piaget (1970), a developmental shift from egocentrism to perspectivism occurs between five and nine years with the development of concrete operational structures. However, much of what is known about operational thought is based on findings from studies of how children organize their nonhuman, physical environment. Although the organization of social and physical knowledge have certain structural symmetries, social cognition does not always display the same formal properties as does physical cognition (Bearison, 1975b, Bearison & Cassel, 1975). For example, certain kinds of experience affect social-cognitive development but not physical cognitive development and vice versa (Hollos & Cowan, 1973; Fink, 1975). As research proceeds in the field of social-cognition, a more balanced picture of cognitive development in general, emerges.

While psychologists have been interested in how children acquire social concepts, in the field of education, interest has grown in the teaching of social sciences. Concern with the teaching of the social sciences began at the college level ten to fifteen years ago and spread to the secondary and primary school levels. The present discussion will be limited to the primary school level. During the past few years a great number of curriculum programs have appeared that are purportedly designed to teach elementary school children about people and how they relate to one another. Although social science curricula in elementary schools is not new, it was formerly ancillary to other topics of instruction. What children were explicitly taught about people was limited to the achievements of a few great men --

rarely women -- in history. It was believed that discussion of contemporary social values that relate directly to children's immediate life-styles was the province of the church and the family, not the public schools. Today, arguments are advanced for curricula that achieve a greater balance between the physical and social sciences in order to make education a more "meaningful" and "relevant" experience for students (Jones, 1970).

Studies of social-cognitive development provide the empirical foundation for teaching social science in the elementary school. Findings have shown that the ability to coordinate multiple points of view is a prerequisite to understanding the complexity of human behavior and social interaction. Therefore, most social science curricula proscribe learning activities which are designed to foster social perspectivism and emphasize the process of social cognition instead of its content. What a child knows about others is less important than how he comes to know it and how he is able to verify what he knows (Piaget, 1971). What is known in the social sciences, even more than in the physical sciences, is determined as much by contemporary attitudes as by historical events and scientific theorems. If learning is to have a lasting effect and be freed from transient attitudes in a complex and rapidly evolving society, then education must focus on the promotion of basic cognitive processes and the application of cognitive operations to socially relevant problems.

Inquiry

Most social science curricula designed to foster the development of multiple points of view focus on "cognitive inquiry" as a basic learning process. According to Dewey (1938), knowledge proceeds from inquiry; therefore, to know something is to inquire of its existence. Similarly for Piaget

(1973), to know something is to cognitively act on it and to understand these actions in the context of existent schemes. Genuine inquiry, as described by Dewey and Piaget, is self-motivated, spontaneous, and inherently rewarding. It produces cognitive changes that "demonstrate long-term stability, increased operational and functional complexity, and [that] involve nonspecific transfer" (Hooper, 1973, p. 5).

In most curricula, evidence of cognitive inquiry is sought in the kinds of questions children ask about the curriculum material. Although it is better for children to know some of the questions than all of the answers, questions that arise from within the learner differ qualitatively from those that are imposed from without. When children are taught "correct" questions in a rote fashion, the term "inquiry" is a misnomer.

How are the conditions for inquiry established? As a general rule, familiarity breeds interest, and interest motivates inquiry. Thus, the contents of social science curricula are important to the extent to which they promote familiarity. Curricula designed for a particular subgroup can increase familiarity by providing content that is relevant to the natural surrounds of the learner. For instance, it is preferable to discuss social relations with urban ghetto children in the context of their own community's needs than in the context of some historical past or distant place. Curricula intended for a more heterogeneous sample would provide unequivocal guides for teachers who wished to select contents that are relevant to their own students.

To illustrate how the contents of curricula can be varied and still maintain the same logical structure of learning, consider the following stories used in a curriculum developed by Selman and Lieberman (1974) to

promote moral reasoning. In one story, a girl waits all week to see a special movie in town. At the movie theatre she joins the line with many other children waiting to buy tickets. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind snatches the money from her hand. She leaves the line to retrieve her money, and when she returns, her place has been taken. The line has grown so much longer that she probably will not get into the theatre if she has to go to the end of the line. The moral dilemma is whether the girl should be permitted to resume her old place in line. In another story, a man's wife is dying and although a local pharmacist has the drug that can save the woman's life, the man can't afford to buy it. He unsuccessfully tries to borrow from friends and to reason with the pharmacist. Finally, he considers stealing the drug. Both stories present the child with moral dilemmas of the same logical form, but the first is more common to children's own experiences and therefore arouses greater inquiry.

Role-taking

Another way that social science curricula foster the development of multiple perspectives is by using role-enactment techniques that lead to role-taking. According to Selman (1973), role-taking is "understanding the nature of the relationship between the self and others' perspectives" (p. 5). In role-enactment, the learner is asked to assume the role of another person and, in the context of acting out the role, he is encouraged to see events through perspectives different from his own -- to make inferences regarding the needs, feelings, motives, intents, and knowledge of others. The problem with role-enactment as a learning activity, however, is that social roles can be prescribed in such a structured manner that the learner foregoes his own perspective in enacting other roles. When this

occurs, the result is mimicry instead of role-taking. Mimicry does not entail the coordination of self and other perspectives and, hence, does not promote social perspectivism.

Familiarity of roles is critical in establishing learning conditions for role-taking. In general, as the psychological distance between the learner and the role is increased, so is the liklihood of mimicry in place of genuine role-taking (Flavell, 1968). The optimal level of psychological distance between the learner and a role is great enough to allow the learner to assume a perspective truly different from his own, but not so great as to preclude the other's perspective from being assimilated to existant schemes of knowing in the learner. Factors in the learner-role relationship that determine psychological distance include age, race, sex, economic class, and cultural mores. Young children are able to identify more easily with people their own age (Flapan, 1968), sex (Feshbach & Roe, 1968), and race (Klein, 1971).

Television as an instructional medium

Most of what we know about people arises from observations of others in different situations. Our knowledge of others also influences our knowledge about ourselves (Mead, 1934). Traditional modes of instruction, including speech and speech-with-pictures, cannot adequately portray for children the dynamics of human interaction. For this lesson, film and television are more effective instructional mediums. Television has several practical advantages over film: Video tapes are easier to produce than film, are less expensive, and easier to view. The advent of video discs to replace tapes will make television an even more accessible medium for instruction. The National Instructional Television Center in Bloomington, Indiana (Mukerji

& Pollak, 1971) has developed a social science curriculum that consists of a series of fifteen minute televised episodes in which people with contrasting points of view are depicted interacting with one another in various contexts. Students are led to consider different kinds of conflict resolutions in terms of human values and moral attitudes.

Despite its initial promise of becoming a revolutionary medium for communication in general, television has never been fully utilized for its instructional potential. Very little is known about how television affects information processing systems, including imagery, verbal mediation, and memory. While many studies have been made of the effect of television viewing on children's social behavior (e.g., Liebert, Neale & Davidson, 1973), there is a dearth of research on the ways in which television can be used to modify learning and cognitive development (Bearison, 1975a).

Television is especially useful for social science curricula because it can offer dramatizations of experiences while engaging children's interest and imagination. Viewing such experiences provides children with a referential base for asking questions, recognizing contradictions, and formulating resolutions.

Ethical values

The object of most social science curricula is to inform children about how people like themselves function in different cultural institutions, so that they discover that in some ways all people are similar and that in other ways people differ according to the kinds of societies they live and grow up in. The teacher's role is to focus on conflicts or contradictions between the children's own attitudes and those of others, to reflect the children's level of reasoning in trying to deal with these contradictions

and conflicts, to highlight the logical inconsistencies in the children's reasoning, and to encourage them to resolve these inconsistencies in their own ways. An underlying assumption of all programs of this type is a belief in the value of cultural pluralism and social relativity. If children can develop a greater appreciation of the diversity of human behavior in the satisfaction of common human needs, they will maintain less egocentric concepts about themselves and others.

Human activity, however, unlike the activity of things, is motivated and shaped by social values. If children are led to question these values by understanding others, then on what basis can it be maintained that one way of behaving is as good as, or better than, another way? In this sense, the teaching of social sciences, unlike that of the physical sciences, encompasses ethical value positions. Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) have advocated an ethical position that transcends cultural boundaries and is justified by such philosophical truths as Kant's categorical imperative (act as you would want everyone else to act in the same situation). However, others have argued that the classroom is not an appropriate place to question social values on the basis of any position that teaching children the relativity of behavior is tantamount to teaching them to reject their own society's values, beliefs, religions, and national loyalties. Congressman John Conlan of Arizona, for example, has argued before the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Representatives that social science curricula in elementary schools undermine the influence of the nuclear family and breed social deviancy. He has specifically criticized Man: A course of Study (Educational Development Center, 1970), a curriculum developed by Jerome Bruner, as an attempt by a "wicked" psychologist to "turn children against their

parents . . . to mold children's attitudes and beliefs along lines that set them apart and alienate them" (cited in Schaar, 1975, p. 4). In a recent review of history courses, the Organization of American Historians also criticized innovations in developing process-oriented curricula, arguing that they "emphasize concepts rather than facts and dates, depriving students of a chronological 'sense' of history" (cited in Cummings, 1975, p. 32).

While findings from social-cognitive research can affect the practice of education by defining effective methods for teaching and evaluation, the ultimate purpose or aim of education is not a scientific matter. In deciding what children ought to be taught in schools, behavioral scientists should not assume that they have a privileged position over school administrators, teachers, governments, school boards, community interest groups, or parents.

Evaluative research

A developmental psychologist reviewing social science curricula is especially interested in the kinds of summative and evaluative research that go into the planning of school curricula. Unfortunately, most current curricula do not report any research findings (Brandwein, 1972; Goodlad, 1973; Moss Lenz, Reed & Brownlee, 1972; Jarolimek & David, 1971; Dinkmeyer, 1971; Gross & Michaelis, 1971; Durkin, McNaughton, Meyers, & Wallen, 1972).

A major obstacle to effective evaluative research is the general lack of lucidly stated program objectives. To illustrate, consider some statements of objectives: "To become more aware of the relationship between the self and other people, personal needs, and goals" (Dinkmeyer, 1971); "to help young children develop a healthy emotional life" (Limbacher, 1971); "to help students understand human behavior and environment" (Brandwein, 1972); "to

foster the recognition of the dignity and worth of the individual" (Moss, Lanz, Reed, & Brownlee, 1972); "to develop an awareness of the relationship between people and their physical and social environments" (Goodlad, 1973).

Unfortunately, even if more precise course objectives were formulated, it would be difficult to devise valid measures to assess social-cognitive change as a result of learning. In comparison to what we know about how children acquire concepts of their physical, nonhuman environment, little is known about how concepts of people (including the self) are structured, how they develop, and how they are affected by experience. Studies of children's understanding of others has focused on several different content areas including role-taking, moral judgment, communication, altruism, and empathy. However, it has been difficult to generalize findings from one content area to another (Kingsly, 1972; Sullivan & Hunt, 1967; Looft, 1970; Finley, French & Cowan, 1973). Even within a content area investigators have not agreed on what constitutes valid measures of social cognition (cf. Chandler & Greenspan, 1972).

Consequently, there is a pressing need to develop innovative methods to assess children's understanding of others. One approach is to observe children's social behavior in relatively naturalistic settings in order to determine what it reaveals about the level of their social thinking. However, although one might expect the quality of children's social behaivor to correlate with levels of social cognitive development, empirical findings do not support such a simple relationship (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Rubin, 1972). Another approach is to train children to understand others and test the effects of training in social settings. A study by Chandler (1973)

in which adolescent delinquents showed a significant increase in pro-social behavior after receiving a series of structured role-taking experiences lends support to this type of approach. In a similar manner, social science curricula can be treated as training variables within an experimental design consisting of pre-and post-training assessments. If the curricula are clearly formulated within a conceptual framework, information concerning their pedagogic value can be had for the educator and information concerning the development of social cognitive processes can be had for the psychologist.

Clearly, the present practice of adopting social science curricula for use in the schools without <u>any</u> objective measures of how it affects learning is irresponsible. Although the arguement for greater interdisciplinary efforts between psychologists and educators has been put forth before, current theoretical interest in social cognition and practical interest in social science education create a particularly favorable context for the advancement of mutual interests.

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